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QUAKERS AND NON/THEISM: QUESTIONS AND PROSPECTS

JEFFREY DUDIACK

Allow me to begin by confessing that, in addition to some genuine measure of delight in engaging a matter of considerable importance, I am uncomfortable discussing Quakers and theism. I am uncomfortable because the structure of this encounter lends itself to, if it does not actively encourage, a certain dynamic, and I am wary of what I am being drawn into, and want to be deliberate about what, even inadvertently, I am perpetuating. I have been asked to contribute to a discussion on “Quakers and theism” where the other invitee, David Boulton, is a renowned Quaker non-theist. I am a confessing Christian Quaker (yes, more confession!—and being a Christian these days often feels like something that one has to confess in the sense of something one is guilty of), so I suppose I am thereby at least a certain kind of theist.¹ Am I, therefore, being pitted, as the Quaker theist, over against the Quaker non-theist, to fight it out over the truth of Quakerism (although sublimated by the at least ostensible disinterestedness of “academic discussion”)? I am not suggesting that Paul Anderson, who organized this exchange, had this as his intent; if Paul had wanted a strong apologist for Quaker theism, he could have done better than me, and I trust also that he has no desire to see this session ape our currently all too pervasive confrontational “journalism,” which is as far as sky is from earth from the “loving contest” that, in Karl Jaspers’ phrase, marks authentic communication.² But the very structure of this session at least threatens us with polemics. And the temptation to this is all the greater in that this question is anything but a merely academic matter among contemporary Friends. Whether posed as that of theism versus non-theism, of Christianity versus universalism, or of orthodoxy versus liberalism, the question of God (God’s existence, identity, and nature) is very much at issue for Friends, and tends to be played out among Friends of different branches, and among individual Friends within them, in a way that opposes us to each other. Without fearing difference, this opposition is what I hope, not to deny, but at least to contextualize, with an end to transforming the way in which we are in it. Indeed, though failingly, I generally try to proceed in life on the

premise that much of what those who disagree with me assert about my position is probably right, so that encounters with my “other” are not first threats, not opportunities for victories, but for honest self-reflection; not first occasions for overcoming, but for undergoing. So my question for myself is: how can I, as a Christian Quaker, be more faithful to God, and to my neighbors, across my encounters with non-theist Friends than I could have been without this challenge? In that, I hope to be a *Friend*.

And yet, as a Friendly *philosopher*, amongst my callings is to questioningly clarify foundational assumptions in order to create an imaginative space for the cultivation of a future not stuck to the past—or in my Christian language: the redemption and renewal of concepts. To that end, I will proceed on two headings, providing in turn: 1. a sketch of one possible understanding of the way in which our modern context shapes the question of theism and non-theism, and the implications of this for religious life; and 2. a very cursory intimation of a way forth for Friends in a post-modern age.

THE AGE OF A/THEISM

There have always been those who believed, and others who did not believe, in God, at least in recorded Occidental history, and so in this very simple sense, there has always been theism and atheism. And yet, there is also a sense in which theism and atheism, in the forms we know them now, would seem to be of relatively late vintage, taking on a shape that is distinctive to our modern age—an adaptation highlighted by our very designation of these terms as “isms,” where the suffix “ism” marks that which precedes it as the central, orienting feature of an approach to reality, as the lens through which reality is perceived and organized, as the fulcrum upon which what reality will be for us balances.

What I will suggest is that the modern, secular age is not only the age of unbelief, it is also the age of belief. Atheism *and* theism, in their intensified, modern sense, are both only possible in a secular age, an age in which faith—as surrendered immersion in a world of ineluctable meanings—has already lost its force. It is not, as the standard modernist story would have it, that we had a medieval age of belief followed by the Enlightenment and its unbelief; rather, the possibility of belief and unbelief, in this modern sense, grew up together in the secular age.

What they share is that which makes their opposition possible: the claim that it is not only possible (which is already a lot), but of central importance, that we make a judgment about whether God either exists or does not. That such a judgment would fall to human beings is what is really significant here, the outcome of our respective judgments notwithstanding. Theism and atheism, as “options” open to a us as subjects endowed with the volition to make such a judgment, are likewise modern possibilities, and can therefore be named together, collaborating in what we might call the “age of a/theism,” or “age of dis/belief,” which I am suggesting supplants an age of faith.³

It is a testament to the overwhelming power of modernity that both theists and atheists are drawn into its field, are, in a sense, its very product, that believers and unbelievers both accept the modern terms of reference for their opposing judgments about God, and attempt to justify their respective positions on its terms. It is a testament to the power of the modern that faith, as I will suggest, has become dependent upon belief or unbelief. And it is a testament to the power of the modern that an older, and I think deeper, sense of faith—that we are caught up in something that precedes, and even makes possible, our volition and consent (and that is preserved in doctrines such as election and predestination that now ring to us so nonsensical and unjust)—has been largely eclipsed on both sides.

Now, I want to take this “power” of the modern seriously, and not only in its (perhaps) religiously deleterious effects, despite the way I am framing things so far. There are good reasons why the modern *Zeitgeist* progressively swept through the West over the past few centuries, and more recently much of the rest of the world as well. The age of reason, in addition to providing us with an unprecedented techno-scientific power over matter, has at least as significantly given us, and continues to give us, an emancipatory leverage against certain entrenched and life-crushing religious, political, and social structures,⁴ whose taken-for-grantedness (the same taken-for-grantedness that qualifies the faith whose loss I am concerned with here!) is well challenged, and (almost) nobody wants to go back to a pre-modern world. And yet, along with the gains, I want to be cognizant of what has been lost, especially (for the purposes of this reflection) from a religious perspective, in this shift from an age of faith to an age of a/theism, that is to say, lost to both theists and atheists.

This shift lends itself to any number of descriptions, but a good place to start is to highlight the manner in which “subjectivity” has

undergone a transformation across it. Whereas for the pre-moderns to be a subject was to be “subject to” in the sense of *subjectum*, and thus essentially passive, the product of forces that transcended it, the modernist sense of subjectivity elevates the subject into the nominative position, and, like the subject of a sentence, is the “subject of” all of its relations with an externality that now stands over against it, at arm’s length, to be perceived or thought or acted upon, that is now transformed into its object. What *is* is no longer simply lived as gift and imperative, but is now dependent upon the judgment of the *cogito*, the rational epistemic subject, who is capable of adjudicating its existence or non-existence, but also of endowing it with value. And so with God too.

This shift is part and parcel of the slow (but steady), complex because multi-faceted, shift from a medieval emphasis upon ontology to the modernist obsessions with epistemology, expressed in the modality of religious life (I am arguing) as a shift from an emphasis on faith to an emphasis on belief. This shift from ontological to epistemological concerns was and continues to be of central philosophical importance: the question was no longer to understand the place of the knower within the world (which would determine how one might then know this world), but to understand what the meaning of the world was over against the knower. The shift from the pre-modern to the modern age in a certain sense introduces nothing new, but it does represent a shift in the centre of gravity of its constitutive terms, and so is quite literally revolutionary, in that what was, for the pre-moderns, primary, has become for us secondary, and what for them was peripheral has become central for us. That is, whereas for the medievals, *belief in God was a response* to finding oneself always already and unquestioningly in God’s world, for us moderns *belief in God is a pre-requisite* for finding ourselves in God’s world. Or again, where for the medievals “faith”—as the total, trusting immersion in a world whose meanings are given along with the world itself—was the context for belief, for us belief is the prerequisite for faith, when faith is not simply conflated with belief (as it often is in modernity). In the modern context, it would indeed be foolish to have faith in God (that is, to live trustingly in the world as God’s world) if one did not believe in God; for the pre-moderns, a lack of belief was not a negative judgment on God, but on the one finding himself or herself in disbelief.

A/theism, I am suggesting, is a modernist, rationalist invention that forces everything to answer before the tribunal of reason, even

God, giving us, in one famous articulation of a broader tide, a “religion within the limits of reason alone.”⁵ But when God has to answer to us, rather than we having to answer to God, then God—or any God worth his or her salt—is already dead, as Nietzsche well knew (evoking in him both horror and celebration).⁶ Theists have, of course, made valiant efforts to provide rational support for belief in God, but if one has to make, is even allowed to make, a rational argument for or against the existence of God, if one is going to trust reason to adjudicate whether or not God exists, then God is no longer God, reason is. God is dead, in some significant sense, as soon as we argue for or against God, rather than from out of God, regardless of the outcome of the argument. In a paradoxical turn, then, atheism has perhaps already won the day, even among the most strident theists. Belief, at least insofar as that term takes on modern intonations, places the centre of gravity in the believing subject, in the person believing or disbelieving, as prior⁷ to that which is believed or disbelieved. In this context it is inevitable rather than surprising that any hope for religion would find its locus in human beings.

How different is this approach, one that dares to hang the existence of God upon our judgments, from the pre-modernist one that defined human lives in relationship to God, rather than God in relationship to us. Something of what I am trying to capture in this distinction of faith from belief is captured in Augustine’s evocation of Mark 9:24: “Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief.”⁸ That one would appeal to God in the face of the lack of belief in God, that one’s response to disbelief is prayer rather than holding one’s faith in abeyance until one’s belief is sure, is contrary to the modern mind. Another famous Augustinian idea, his “*credo ut intelligam*” (“I believe in order to understand”), though perhaps better known in its Anselmian variant “*fides quaerens intellectum*” (“faith seeking understanding”), also expresses this pre-modern priority, and helps us to view differently such phenomena as the traditional proofs for the existence of God, that are distorted in the modern framework which takes them as neutral, rational proofs, rather than what they were, a form of praise, or, in Karl Jaspers’ terms: “our attempts to express the experience of man’s ascent to God in terms of thought.”⁹

On a parallel plane, the critical, modern paradigm that refuses to allow anything to operate behind the back of the knower therefore places anything that can be known—and thus anything that can have existence and meaning for us—in the position of an object over

against the knowing subject, and thus conceives of God, if God is to be known, along the same lines. Modernity, in its embrace of the “knowing subject-known object” relationship as foundational, severely narrows down the range of possibilities of understanding and relating to God. On this model, *either* God is an object (albeit a supernatural or transcendent one) that exists out there in some manner like other objects of our knowledge, *or else* as merely the projection of our subjective desires or wishes. Put otherwise, both theism and non-theism accept the natural-supernatural distinction—this shared conceptual framework providing the ground of the disagreement and thus setting the terms for subsequent debates. The denial of the supernatural in favor of the natural thus perceives itself as godless, just as, on the other side, the affirmation of the supernatural is perceived as the only way to really affirm God. Accepting this framework means that we limit ourselves to asserting God as a supernatural object, or reducing God to a projection of a natural subject in the form of story or metaphor or fiction or what have you. We thereby create for ourselves a forced, and perhaps false, choice between transcendent theism and immanent naturalism where these are pitted antagonistically over against each other.

But this forced “either-or”—either transcendent object, or subjective projection, the terms on which the debate about God’s reality is largely transacted in modernity—is a blunt instrument. Taken literally, theistic claims are precisely incredible—an incredulity that can be used either by atheists to reject theism, or by someone of the order of Kierkegaard to heighten the need for an irrational faith. Not surprisingly, modern non-theists, especially aided by the truncated sense of “knowledge” that prevails in modern thought, have little trouble mocking and belittling such conceptions of God as silly and infantile and incredulous—which if taken as objects of knowledge they are! But to jump to the equal and opposite conclusion that since these objectifications of God are incredible in the modern world that therefore God simply *is* a projection of human values and aspirations, full stop, is to be equally if oppositely dogmatic (for the claim here is also to *know* what “God” is), equally if oppositely non-nuanced in imagining alternative, and perhaps more fruitful, understandings of, and ways of living, such claims. Correlatively, theists end up defending an image of God that is already (at least according to the Biblical tradition) a perversion of God simply by dint of having its center of gravity in conceptuality—which the Bible refers to as a “graven image,” i.e., an image we take too gravely, too seriously, i.e.,

objectively. The Biblical text itself provides as trenchant a critique of “theism” in this sense as any modern secularist could dream of in its obsessive attention to idolatry. The Scriptures are neither theist nor non-theist; it is modern thought that creates “a/theists” in the modern sense.

Indeed, understanding God as *either* an objective being *or* merely subjective projection may not be the only, or the best, foundation for relating to God. Rather than understanding God as a transcendent object that somehow exists “out there,” or as a wishful extension of the human “here,” we might do well to entertain the possibility that God talk becomes meaningful in transcending the very subject-object structure itself. Indeed, when it comes to the transcendent Other it may well be the case that, in the provocative refrain of Emmanuel Levinas, “to be or not to be is not the question.”¹⁰ One has to wonder whether the existence/non-existence categories in which the question of theism and atheism is framed are really the most appropriate ones to the experience of God, whether they are true to whatever “reality” God has for those for whom God is, in another phrase from Levinas, “at the apex of vocabulary,”¹¹ or whether they are not precisely an impediment to religious depth.

Belief and unbelief, and their correlates existence and non-existence, as primary, and binary, possibilities, as foundational to the possibility of any subsequent relationship (or lack thereof) with God, I am suggesting, eclipse the possibility that our fundamental encounter with God be transacted under the auspices of another modality. Along these lines I have been meditating on the late-in-life concession (of sorts) of the famous American, modern-liberal, pragmatist, philosopher, Richard Rorty, who, near the end of a life of ardent atheism, began to engage religious thinkers in a more sympathetic way. He was not won over to religion, by any means, but rather than re-mounting an attack, he humbly admitted that he just didn’t get it, that he was “religiously unmusical.”¹² What I have been entertaining in this essay is the possibility that this situation is neither specific nor idiosyncratic to Rorty, but that being religiously tone deaf is endemic to our modernity. Perhaps, just perhaps, the foundational nature of belief or disbelief with respect to any further religious commitment, and a subject-object model of religious knowledge, obstructs a more genuinely “religious” moment, centered upon the vocative, our being called upon by God, and our “being attuned” to this voice. But this would require the de-centering of concern over what we are capable of “seeing,” i.e., understanding, as the active judging of the credibility

of objective facts, and a commitment to cultivating a more passive sensibility, a commitment to developing, in the Biblical idiom, “ears to hear.”¹³ Such a commitment seems to me commensurate with corporate Quaker practice, and consistent with historic Quaker faith.

BEYOND A/THEISM

Indeed, the modern age, the age of a/theism, may be in its dotage in any case, as there are signs all around (and not just in the minds of bored humanities and social science professors) that faith in the tenets of modern thought is in serious decline, and the post-modern age is upon us. On another possible interpretation, modernity, far from being on its deathbed, has rather finally outgrown the “angry young man” phase it had been in for most of the past three-hundred years, when it arrogantly and mercilessly rained down its rational critique upon everything else, and now, coming into a more measured and self-reflective maturity, it has brought to bear its critical energies upon itself as well—now chastened in understanding that its judgments are not, after all, absolute. On this latter reading, the postmodern turn cannot be employed as an excuse to revert to a non-critical, pre-modern naivete (as if that were even possible, as if that were even desirable), but as the pushing through to a *hyper*-critical, self-aware “second naivete” (to borrow the phrase of Paul Ricoeur¹⁴), one that refuses to abandon modern rationality and its contributions, even while it resists the temptation to idolize it, i.e., to give it the last word in any and every dispute.

And this is why the critique of modernity should not be taken as just a covert argument for theism after all; the critique of critique¹⁵ must cut as deeply into theism as into atheism as a questioning of the ultimacy of (and not the destruction of) the question of theism and non-theism. For while the question of theism and non-theism is relativized under the postmodern, it does not go away. We still either will, or will not, believe in God, and will still be faced, as a Religious Society, with the ongoing challenge of providing a communal articulation of that which calls us beyond ourselves into worship in its full and varied senses. For some of us (myself included) the language of belief in God and Christ will be essential to this articulation; for others of us this language will be an impediment. So whether we use this language or not is no matter of indifference, and we must continue to honestly, respectfully, wrestle with this. But we can perhaps more sagely and

imaginatively do so when this challenge to communal understanding is undertaken at a depth that gets us beyond the too simple critique of an objectivist religion on the one hand, and the too simple embracing and defending of such on the other, as we attempt to transcend the overly restrictive options which have been bequeathed to us by modern thought. The diversity, traditional truthfulness and trust, and practiced patience in listening for spiritual leadings places Friends in a perhaps unique position to make a contribution to religious thought and life in these our changing, and challenging, times.

ENDNOTES

- 1 I will later in this paper advocate belief in God as a responsible expression of faith in God, not as a free-standing, or foundational, belief.
- 2 Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1951), 26.
- 3 Arguments of this ilk are not entirely new. Karen Armstrong and Marcus Borg make similar arguments from the side of theology, although my influences are a certain “school” of Continental post-phenomenologists who have reflected meaningfully on religion, principally Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. But these points bear re-articulating because of the depth at which we are *all* in the grip of modern prejudices, including (as the best of them will readily acknowledge) the discourses that are most critical of them. The five-hundred year history of the transition from a time in which “belief” was all but presupposed (and so was not yet “belief” in the modern sense) to our own time in which “belief” is optional is meticulously traced in: Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), another text which is in the background of my analyses.
- 4 Neither is this quite so straightforward as the standard modernist story would have it, of course, as our power over matter is at the same time a destructive power over nature, and a power over each other, which mitigates much of the naive sanguinity of scientism and liberalism.
- 5 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960).
- 6 As witnessed in the madman’s rant that announces the famous “death of God.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), sec. 125.
- 7 Prior not chronologically, but in epistemological importance.
- 8 Augustine, *Sermons on the New Testament*, number 65.
- 9 Jaspers, 42.
- 10 Levinas employed this rhetorical variant on Hamlet in several texts and contexts over a number of years, but perhaps first in 1947 in *Time and the Other*.
- 11 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 156.
- 12 Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, Santiago Zabala, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 30-34.
- 13 Matthew 11:15, Mark 4:9, Revelation 3:22.

- 14 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 349-350.
- 15 “The critique of critique” harbors the paradox in that it both leaves in place the priority of the critical/judging subject (it remains an activity of a subject) even while it displaces the priority of the critical/judging subject (by calling it into question). This is part of what distinguishes the post-modern from a mere return to the pre-modern.